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PHYSICAL EDUCATION OF THE BLIND

A REPRINT OF A PAPER READ ON THE 25TH JULY, 1883,
AT THE CONFERENCE IN YORK.

BY

DOCTOR M. ROTH,

OF LONDON.

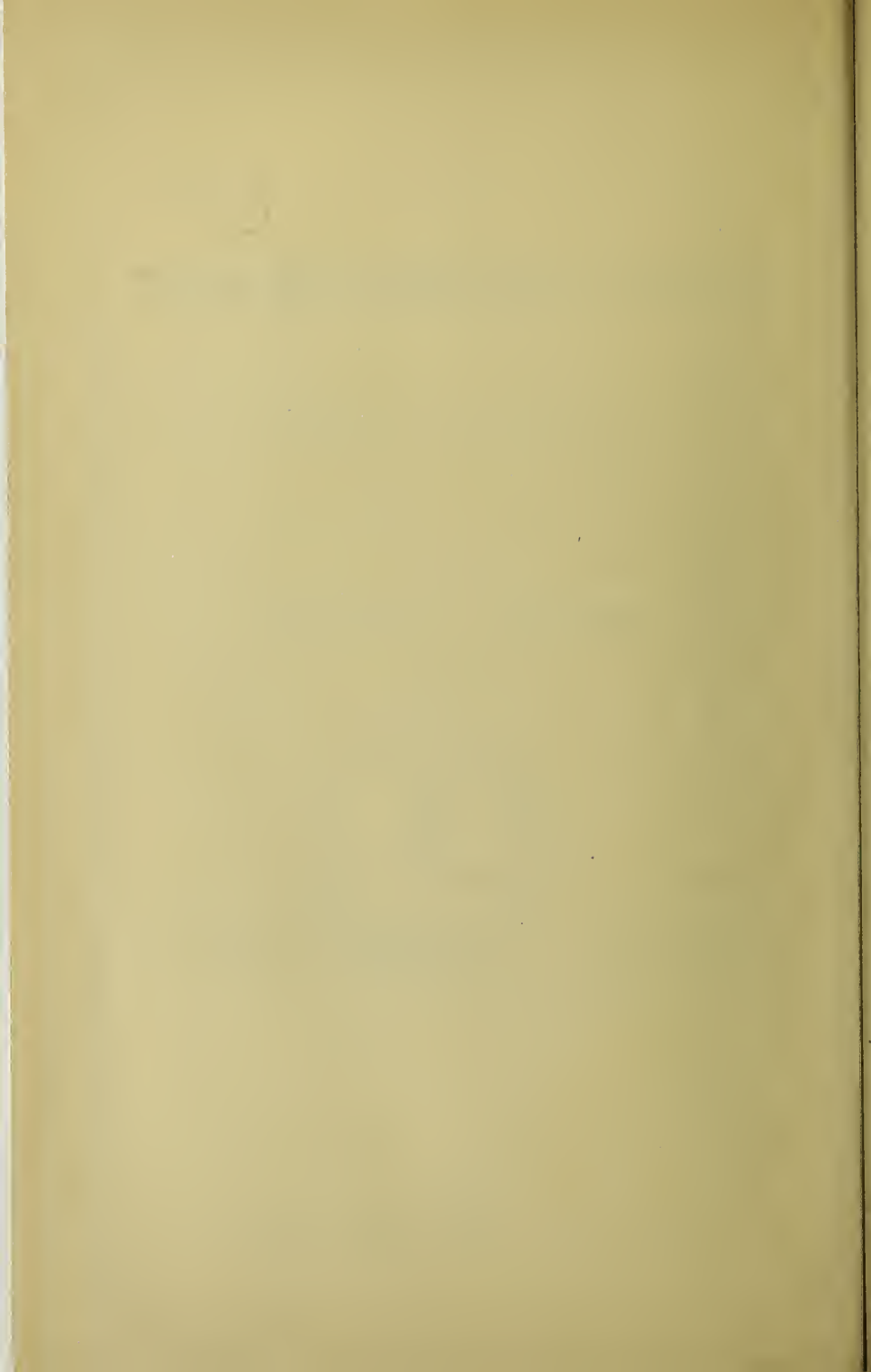
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ON THE PHYSICAL EDUCATION OF THE BLIND.

The physical education of the blind does not differ from that of those who can see: but this branch of scientific education is, in general, still very much neglected, especially in England, although this is the country which excels in all kinds of athletic and other sports; but the number of those who have great stamina and splendid physical development forms but a very small minority, while the physique of the people is still very deficient in its development.

A few years ago I published a little book on the "Neglect of Physical Education and Hygiene by Parliament and the Educational Department," and, with your permission, I shall read a few facts collected for the purpose of proving the *progressive* degeneration of the physique of the population of Great Britain.

1. The Surgeon-major of the London Recruiting District said, a few years ago, after inspecting 25,000 recruits, "*I must candidly assert that the physique of the infantry is not up to the standard of our race.*"

2. Mr. Tuffnel, one of H.M. Inspectors of Union Schools, gave evidence *on the inferior stature and physique* of the children of the London (Union) Workhouse Schools.

3. Of 1000 recruits, after having accepted the shilling, 400 were rejected because they suffered from eye disease, small malformed chest, curvature of spine, varicose veins, varicocele, muscular tenuity, and other complaints.

4. Of 5567 boys, 4410 were rejected; they were under standard of chest, width, and under standard of height. (Dr. Ord's Report in 1869.)

5. Of 530 candidates for railway employment, 201 were rejected; the chief cause of rejection was small malformed chest in 92 cases. (Report of Medical Officers of Great Western and Associated Railways, 1862.)

6. Of 358 children under 15 years of age in a Metropolitan Suburban Workhouse, 84, or 23.4 per cent., are affected with *chronic disease*.

7. "The physique of the people is deteriorating, as proved by the diminution of height since 1845, when, out of 1000 recruits, only 105 were under 5ft. 6in., while in 1873 more than three times as many, namely 364, were under that height, and consequently the standard of recruits was necessarily and gradually diminished to 5ft. 4½inches, and the maximum of age increased from 25 to 30." (*Paper on Excessive Infant Mortality and Model Nursing, by Dr. Roth.*)

This is a picture of the seeing population—the condition of the blind is not better. A stooping gait, flat chests, round and high shoulders, a round back, shuffling walk, unequal shoulders, deformed spines, lateral and other curvatures of the spine, weak ankles, and bent knees, are a few of the characteristic symptoms frequently found among the blind.

What I have just mentioned will convince you that it is not only desirable but absolutely necessary to attend to the physique of the blind, who, by greater development of their sense of touch and hearing, have to supply that of sight.

It is the fashion to divide education into three parts—moral, intellectual, and physical; although moral faculties cannot be developed without intellectual ones, nor the intellectual without the physical development of the body and the senses—or the real gateways of knowledge; in fact the physical must precede any other part of education.

The age of childhood and growth is consecrated by nature to those exercises which fortify and strengthen the body, and not to study, which weakens it and prevents its proper increase and development.

"*Now what is Physical Education?* Unfortunately gymnastics, drill, athletics, and what is found on prospectuses of genteel girls' schools under the high sounding title of *calisthenics*, are too often jumbled up in people's minds under the common appellation of *physical education*; and when one talks of introducing physical education in boys' schools, the drill-sergeant rises up before men's eyes as the embossed emblem of physical education." I have quoted these lines from a speech in the House of Commons by Mr. Butler Johnston, M.P. for Canterbury, in July, 1875, who, having well studied the advantages to be derived from the general introduction of scientific physical education, wished to induce the Government to make it an obligatory branch of education in all schools.

By physical education is meant the *instruction of some sound though elementary principles of hygiene, combined with the practice of scientifically devised exercises founded on sound anatomical and physiological principles*. The aim of this science is the *harmonious development of body and mind*; it considers man as an inseparable unity, and does not admit partial development of the body, or of

its *single parts without a harmonious development of the mind*. In order to convince myself of the state of physical education in the fifty schools, homes, and workshops for the blind in the United Kingdom, the following request has been sent in the name of the Society for Prevention of Blindness, to all these institutions:—

“Please kindly inform the Society whether anything is done in your Institution for the Improvement of the Physique of the Blind, and which are the means you have introduced for this purpose. Any statistical information on the causes of blindness, and the number of your old and young inmates, will oblige.”

Only eleven answers have been received, from which the following extracts are given:—

BRIGHTON:—“We have a German Professor, who gives lessons in Calisthenics to our children four times a week, an hour and a half to two hours each lesson.”

CARDIFF:—“We have only men and big lads working here, who have plenty of hard work, which in a few weeks works a great change in their physique, and they require little else.”

NORWICH:—A visitor writes, “Gymnastic exercise is confined to the men, and consists of blind man’s buff in the garden. The Matron said that the women ought to have backs to the forms. No attention to the development of the body is bestowed upon the inmates.”

NOTTINGHAM:—“We have at times engaged a drilling master for the pupils, being convinced of this desirable attention to their physical condition.”

SHEFFIELD:—“We have drilling twice a day in the schools, sometimes with light dumb-bells, and at other times without. We teach them the extension motions and other ordinary drill exercises. The pupils are encouraged to walk round the path in the grounds, prizes being given and a record kept of the distances they walk. We have *no* backs to the seats, but the pupils are continually reminded of the necessity of keeping in an upright position. They go for long walks in the country and have good health.”

SOUTHSEA:—“The male portion are exercised at drill under a sergeant of the army twice in each week, which is found very beneficial to their health and a source of enjoyment to them. The whole of the inmates, male and female, take walking exercise twice a week, on Wednesday for an hour and on Saturday for two or three hours.”

SWANSEA (in 1880):—“Very little is done for the physique of the blind at our Institution.”

“(In 1881) We formed a class for drilling our blind boys and girls, and they are decidedly improved by the exercises.”

BATH :—"Our pupils learn drilling exercise and marching, besides out door walking, swinging, &c. They are provided with benches having backs for their support when sitting."

IPSWICH :—"Nothing is done in our Institution for the physique of the Blind."

LEICESTER :—"No Blind person resides in this institution. The Report of the Association for the welfare of the blind does not mention *Physical Education*."

No replies were received from the other forty establishments for the Blind, a fact that may be due in some cases to accidental oversight, but in others doubtless owing to the fact that the importance of physical training for the welfare and happiness of blind persons is not yet so fully appreciated as may be the case before long.

It is to be deeply regretted that the condition of things in the Metropolitan Blind Asylums is not better.

In ST. GEORGE'S IN THE FIELDS, the oldest and richest Blind Institution in London, nothing has yet been done for the physical education of the blind children. The girls still continue high and round shouldered and stooping; no backs are yet to be seen on the forms on which they sit for hours daily, in stooping positions. As the Committee have means for providing backs to the seats, and for introducing all those means which contribute to the improvement of the physique of the blind, it is a painful duty to be obliged to mention publicly the apparently utter neglect of physical education, which is of the greatest importance for the blind, and which, according to the experience of the Principal of the Normal College for the Blind in Norwood, is the basis of all other education for the blind.

In the Institution and School for the Blind at St. John's Wood nothing yet has been done for the better physical development of the blind pupils.

The physique of the blind children in the London Board Schools is entirely neglected; gymnastic models have been lent to the Superintendent of the blind children under the School Board, who is devoted to her work; but there is not enough space in the little rooms (where usually a few blind children are collected) for them to stretch out their arms while standing. This want of space has been mentioned as a cause why they could not even make an attempt at introducing some elementary exercises.

I am sorry to state that physical education of the blind has not made any progress in this country, except in the Normal College for the Blind, in Upper Norwood, where Dr. Campbell, the blind principal, who knows best what the blind require, has, like so many others, for a long time insisted on the importance

of physical education for the blind. He says, "It is the lever which would give irresistible force to all the other educational methods adopted on their behalf; without it, other modes, however efficiently carried out, fail to attain their final aim. The secret of success rests fundamentally on physical training.

On the Continent much attention has been paid for years to the physical education of the blind. I remember with pleasure my visit to the Royal Blind Institution in Copenhagen, when I was present at a lesson in free exercises, and where I have seen the blind girls dance a walse and leave the room with a nice *curtsey*, which proved their ease and freedom of movement.

Time prevents my entering into the details of physical education, which at present is in England still in the hands of the drill-sergeant, the master of gymnastics, the teacher of calisthenics, and of the dancing mistresses, who all try their best to do their duty; but, as they, with very few exceptions, have not the knowledge of the elements of the structure and functions of the human body, nor of hygiene and psychology, nor of the theory and practice of scientific gymnastics, it is quite natural that the standard of English physical education is not a high one. Abroad, professors of classics and other sciences, medical men, officers in the army, well trained schoolmasters and mistresses, who, after having passed their preliminary examination, have to pass a special course of theoretical and practical physical education, are the persons engaged in this most important branch of education.

It is the ambition and pride of some Head-masters of Blind Schools to show that their blind pupils can do, what those who see can do; but the nonsense of people with eyes need not be imitated by the blind. In the development of the body we must try to educate those faculties which tend to produce harmony between the various parts, and so aim at the useful, agreeable, and beautiful; and not at the rude, ugly, and grotesque. The aim of physical education is not to produce athletes, gymnasts, rope dancers, and clowns; but, as Dr. Werner says, to enable persons in various stations of life to do their duties, and to have a certain amount of health, strength, perseverance, skill, and activity of the body, acuteness of the senses, cheerfulness, manliness, activity, and presence of mind, courage, beauty of soul, and strength of the thinking faculties.

Physical education has two principal parts; the first not to interfere with the natural development of the body, and the second to develop it by exercise based on physiological principles—to begin with the most gentle and simple, and by degrees to pass to the strong and complicated exercise.

1. In order not to interfere with the development of the body, we must begin with the baby, for whom pure air, pure

water, proper food, and cleanliness of body and dress are as important as for the child, the youth, and the man, in blind institutions. No pressure on any part of the body is permitted, if you do not wish to interfere with the circulation and other normal functions. Tight caps or hats, tight collars, coats, stays, corsets, waistbands, trousers, garters, shoes and boots, are still too frequently found in Blind Institutions. Bad school-furniture, narrow forms without backs; too low or too high chairs with concave backs; too low or too high tables, induce the young and old pupils to sit in bad positions, to compress chest and abdomen, to lean on each other, and thus to predispose them to projecting chins, round and high shoulders, various deformities of the spine, and also more easily to coughs and colds.

(Dr. Roth showed a hygienic school desk, which, according to his suggestion, is manufactured by the North of England School Furniture Company, in Darlington, and pointed out its advantages in enabling the pupil to write and read in good positions, without being fatigued. Models of hygienic boots and of digitated stockings and socks were shewn, and their advantages, especially for the blind, pointed out. The speaker mentioned the importance of the greater development of the sense of touch in the feet and toes of the blind, which would enable them to judge better of the nature of the ground on which they walk. Hygienic stays and under-clothing for women, and models of trousers, which do not exert any pressure on the chest and abdominal organs, and do not interfere with the natural growth of the body, and the normal circulation of the blood, prepared according to the suggestions of the lecturer, were also shewn. It was pointed out that braces are not wanted, that they often interfere with the freedom of the chest; and that petticoats and trousers are to be fastened *on* the hip, but *not above* the hip; in the latter case the abdominal organs are too much pressed.* A few remarks on cleanliness of the body, and clothing; on the proper food for blind children—especially for those with a sickly constitutional predisposition—on the unsuitable and too frequent use of suet and other puddings, with the intention of filling the pupil's stomach, and preventing them from taking more healthy food, closed the first part of physical education.)

2. At present the best system of developing the body harmoniously is the scientific one, which we owe to the Swede Ling—it is the best because every exercise is based on anatomy,

* At the request of several persons, asking where the various articles of clothing prepared according to Dr. Roth's suggestions may be obtained, we give the addresses of Messrs. Pool and Lord, Drapers, 145, Oxford Street, W., for digitated socks and stockings; Messrs. Stammvitz, Giles, and Co., 15, Argyle Street, Regent Street, W., for trousers and vests; Mrs. Wise, Stay-maker, 15, High Street, Marylebone, for stays and under-clothing; Mr. Hall, 39, Edgeware Road, for shoes. All these tradesmen are in London, and have kindly lent the various models of their manufacture.

physiology, and hygiene; it has four great branches—the educational, the military, the medical, and the æsthetic. Here we are interested merely in the *educational*, which has two principal parts; the one contains *free* exercises, and the other exercises with apparatus.

Want of time prevented the speaker from entering fully into the details of Ling's system, and he referred those interested in the subject to his papers and pamphlets on Ling's Exercises and Physical Education, published by Messrs. Brailliere and Co., 20, King William Street, Strand, London, W.C., who, on application, would forward a list of these publications. Dr. Roth showed a small collection of his gymnastic models for the use of the blind, which was presented to the Yorkshire School for the Blind by the Society for the Prevention of Blindness and the Improvement of the Physique of the Blind. Some remarks on the advantages of the free exercises—that is of those which are done without any gymnastic apparatus, either by one or many persons at the same time, or by a group of two or three persons who assist or resist each other, according to the order prescribed in the table of exercises—finished this part of physical education, which was illustrated by several diagrams of simple exercises, of those on apparatus, and of the injurious positions to be avoided during the period of education and growth.

